

WRIGHT BROTHERS MASTER PILOT AWARD

**Fairbanks Flight Standards District
Office Honoree 2004**

GEORGE CLAYTON



CLAYTON, GEORGE. George Clayton was born on April 22, 1920 in Canton, Massachusetts. Here is an early picture of Captain Clayton and his first officer! His family's involvement in aviation began in 1907, when his grandfather competed in the first national balloon race as the winning team's meteorologist. His father continued with the family's aviation tradition by joining the Navy as a naval aviator and later he and George's mother started a barnstorming business on Long Island Sound.

Some of George's earliest memories involve riding along with his parents on some of these flights. His father would fly the aircraft while his mother played the role of wing walker! George also recalls the time his aunt came to visit around 1932. His dad packed everyone up in the family's Curtiss Flying Boat and flew them over the Empire State Building, which was being built at the time. Unfortunately, right as they were flying over it, the engine threw its

camshaft, triggering an explosion of flames! Thinking quickly, his father relinquished the airplane controls to his mother and proceeded to walk out between the wings of the biplane and put the fire out. Fortunately they were able to glide to the east river and put the aircraft down in an empty space where normally a freighter would have been. When the Coast Guard came and towed them to shore, they were amazed that they had survived the emergency. George still remembers his father saying that he would never fly that piece of junk again!

George finally became involved in aviation himself at the age of 19 when he started helping out at an airport in Massachusetts, acquiring time in a J-3 Cub. Shortly thereafter, he met an Eastern Airlines Pilot who allowed him to fly along on some flights, going so far as to allow him to solo the aircraft, unofficially, George admits! Then in 1941, George got hired on as an aircraft mechanic for Pan American Airlines. His first assignment was on board the USS Santa Paula, one of the fastest ships of its time, on a secret mission from New York to Africa. There he met Bernie Sherwood and formed a friendship which would last a lifetime and see them all of the way from Africa, to the Egyptian Sudan, and eventually to Fairbanks, Alaska.

After returning home, George was told to report to Pan American's Pacific Alaska Division at Boeing Field. There he went through training and bought a beautiful black Buick which he named "Black Beauty." When he got transferred to Whitehorse, he decided to do the unthinkable and got permission to drive "Black Beauty" from Seattle to

Whitehorse. Since the Alaska Highway was just being built, the road was nearly impassable, and it took George nearly 7 months to accomplish his mission, but eventually “Black Beauty” arrived, first in Whitehorse, and later in Fairbanks, and became one of the first, if not the first, civilian automobiles to have conquered the Alaskan Highway.

Eventually George ended up in Fairbanks where he met Virginia June Merrill, a flight instructor at the Top of the World Flying School in Fairbanks. Virginia taught George to fly and on August 26, 1944 the two were married in Ketchikan.

During the following years, George got his A&E license and bought a J-3 Cub in Seattle, to get the 200 hours required for a commercial certificate. Later he became an instructor at Fairbanks Air Service, got his Airline Transport Rating and went to work for Northern Consolidated Airways, first as a mechanic and later as a pilot flying out of Bethel.

In 1949, George purchased a Stinson Reliant that he fondly refers to as “Peter Pan.” The price of the airplane was his pickup truck, a rifle, a boat, a five-man tent, and his outboard motor! After fixing the aircraft up, he and Virginia, accompanied by their children, flew the airplane first to Boston and then to various places back east and in Florida. There he acquired more flight time as well as ratings, and taught himself to fly by reference to instruments, using a portable instrument panel he built himself. In 1950, he and Virginia returned home to Fairbanks where he got a job with Wien Air Alaska.

George worked for Wien for 30 years and retired on April 18, 1980, as a captain on the Boeing 737. His former Wien passengers fondly remember him for his harmonica serenades over the airplane’s P.A. system. George and his wife Virginia live in Fairbanks, where they raised their children, Gregory, Mary Christine, and Nancy. When asked if he still flies, George replied, “Only when I’m invited to!”